DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 449 241 UD 033 924

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TITLE	Retention and Social Promotion: Research and Implications for Policy. ERIC Digest Number 161.
INSTITUTION	ERIC Clearinghouse on Urban Education, New York, NY.
SPONS AGENCY	Office of Educational Research and Improvement (ED), Washington, DC.
REPORT NO	EDO-UD-00-0
ISSN	ISSN-0889-8049
PUB DATE	2000-12-00
NOTE	4p.; Based on a report that can be found at http://www.consortium-chicago.org.
CONTRACT	ED-99-CO-0035
AVAILABLE FROM	ERIC Clearinghouse on Urban Education, Institute for Urban and Minority Education, Box 40, Teachers College, Columbia University, NY 10027. Tel: 800-601-4868 (Toll Free); For full text: http://eric-web.tc.columbia.edu.
PUB TYPE	ERIC Publications (071) -- ERIC Digests in Full Text (073)
EDRS PRICE	MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	Academic Achievement; *Educational Policy; Elementary Secondary Education; *Grade Repetition; High Risk Students; Identification; *Social Promotion; Urban Schools
IDENTIFIERS	Chicago Public Schools IL; ERIC Digests

ABSTRACT

This digest highlights major research findings about social promotion, retention, and programs that identify and assist students at risk of retention. Research findings indicate that, overall, neither social promotion nor retention offers lasting advantage nor leads to high performance. Some evidence supports, and little evidence disputes, the indictment of social promotion. Retention is common; census data suggest that as many as thirty percent of all students have been retained at least once by the time they reach high school. By high school, the retention rates are ten percentage points higher for boys than for girls and fifteen points higher for African Americans and Hispanics than for Whites. Research suggests that retention can help sometimes, but early retention is harmful. Overall, retention is risky, and it is clear that it is not cost effective. A recent policy instituted in Chicago schools bars social promotion but creates mechanisms, such as after-school programs and mandatory summer instruction, to assist students at risk for retention. Early research on the consequences of this policy indicates that most students made impressive standardized test score gains, with the largest gains made by students with the lowest prior scores. Students who were retained were not helped by the second pass through the grade they failed. Implications for policy are discussed. Chief among these are the suggestions that promotion gateways should not be introduced in the early grades, and that sound educational decisions require multiple assessments. (Contains 11 references.) (SLD)

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ERIC CLEARINGHOUSE ON URBAN EDUCATION
DECEMBER 2000

UD033924

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ERIC CLEARINGHOUSE ON URBAN EDUCATION

DIGEST

Number 161, December 2000 EDO-UD-00-0 ISSN 0889 8049

RETENTION AND SOCIAL PROMOTION: RESEARCH AND IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY

The issue of whether it is better to retain low-performing students in grade or to pass them along with their age-mates has been both hotly disputed and heavily studied for decades. Advocates of retention have maintained that it sends a message to all students that weak effort and poor performance will not be tolerated, and that it gives lagging students an opportunity to get serious and get ready for the next grade. Opponents have argued that retention discourages students whose motivation and confidence are already shaky, and that promoted students gain an opportunity to advance through the next year's curriculum, while retained students go over the same ground and thus fall farther behind their advancing peers.

For many years, research on social promotion and retention simply compared the two. Researchers asked whether low-performing students who repeat a grade fare better or worse than similarly low-performing students who are promoted. In contrast, more recent "no promotion" policies do not replace social promotion with simple retention that recycles students through the same grade they have failed. Instead, the policies are intended to replace both social promotion and simple retention with identification of students at risk for retention and aggressive intervention to catch them up to their peers.

This digest highlights major findings about social promotion; retention; and newer programs that identify students at risk of retention, give them extra assistance, and use retention as a last resort.

Findings from the Research

Overall, neither social promotion nor retention leads to high performance. If the goal is to bring low-performing students up to the higher standards now being asserted across the nation, neither retention nor social promotion is effective. In different studies, one or the other has been found to offer an advantage, but neither has been found to offer a large, lasting advantage, and neither leads to high performance.

Social Promotion

It is impossible to tell how common social promotion is. Currently, virtually no statistics are kept on social promotions, in part because few districts explicitly embrace or admit to the practice.

Some evidence supports, and little evidence disputes, the indictment of social promotion. Critics of social promotion argue that it frustrates promoted students by placing them in grades where they cannot do the work, sends the message to all students that they can get by without working hard, forces teachers to deal with under-prepared students while trying to teach the prepared, gives parents a false sense of their children's progress, leads employers to conclude that diplomas are meaningless, and dumps poorly educated students into a society where they cannot perform. Some early evidence from districts that have eliminated social promotion supports this indictment, and even opponents of "no social promotion" policies do not defend social promotion so much as say that retention is even worse.

Retention

Retention is common. Nationally, no statistics are kept on retention, but reasonable estimates based on census data suggest that as many as one-third of all students have been retained at least once by the time they reach high school. For boys and minorities, retention is even more common. Nationally, by high school, the retention rate for boys is about ten percentage points higher than for girls. In the early grades, retention rates are similar among whites, African Americans, and Hispanics, but by high school, the rate is about 15 percentage points higher for African Americans and Hispanics than for whites.

Transitions are peak times for retention. Students are most commonly retained at the end of the year after the transition into elementary school, into middle or junior high school, and into high school.

Retention can help sometimes, but early retention is harmful, and overall, retention is risky. Retention may help some students in some circumstances, but there are serious risks associated with it. Retaining students in first grade is surprisingly common and frequently harmful. Even the best-designed of recent studies that found in favor of retention in general also found that students retained in first grade do worse than expected, both academically and emotionally. There is also substantial evidence that retention in kindergarten is equally harmful. Being removed from a group of peers with whom a student has just gotten comfortable seems to compound the difficulty of adjusting to school and to set the child back rather than help.

A recent study of Chicago's "no social promotion" policy (see below) indicates that retention is harmful as late as third grade. While early research on the success of the Chicago program shows that students, especially those with the lowest prior scores, showed impressive gains after a full year of intervention and intensive summer instruction, retained third graders scored significantly *lower* than promoted third graders.

For other grades, the research is mixed. A few well-designed studies have found that retained students do better academically and feel better about themselves and about school during the first three years after retention. Consistent with the Chicago findings reported here, the biggest advantage was found in a district that identified students early, attempted to avoid retention through remediation, and gave special assistance to retained students. Even there, as in other studies, the advantage for retained students declined each year and washed out altogether after three years. Other studies have found that retention either offers no advantage or actually harms students. Taken together, the studies find that simple retention — retention without efforts at prevention and special assistance for those retained— is especially risky.

Retaining students, regardless of the grade at which they are retained, increases the likelihood that they will drop out of school.

Retention is not cost effective. Retention is expensive: at a minimum, it entails the cost of an additional year of schooling for

each student retained. On the whole, retention is not a cost-effective response to poor performance when viewed in the light of cheaper or more effective interventions, research findings demonstrating no advantage to, or even harm from, retention, and the tendency for gains from retention to wash out.

The effects of retention vary with contexts, treatments, and individual student characteristics. Some of the differences in study findings result from differences and flaws in research design. But many of the differences probably just reflect variations in family, school, and community contexts; in the ways that retained students are treated as the decision to retain them is announced, during the repeated year, and afterwards; and in individual students.

Identification and Intervention

Chicago recently instituted a policy that bars social promotion, establishes "gateway" grades where students must pass standardized tests to be promoted, creates mechanisms to identify students at risk for retention, provides after-school assistance during the school year and mandatory summer instruction for those who need it, but does retain students who fail to meet the standards even with the extra attention.

Early research on the consequences of Chicago's policy indicates that most students made impressive standardized test score gains. Students with the lowest prior scores made the largest measured gains. But third graders' learning gains actually declined after the policy was implemented. And students who were retained were not helped by a second pass through the grade they failed.

Implications for Policy

Policymakers considering "no social promotion" policies should know that while such policies can pay off for the majority of students, several cautions are in order:

- The large numbers of students retained in first grade and even in kindergarten, together with the finding that early retention often harms students, underline the importance of preschool programs that prepare children to succeed in school.
- The findings regarding early retention indicate that promotion gateways should not be introduced in early grades. Rather, student progress should be closely tracked from the earliest grades, with swift remediation provided to students who are lagging.
- The transitions into middle and high school also warrant special attention for students at risk of retention—both before and after a transition is made.
- Sound decisions require multiple assessments. The decision to promote a student should not be made on the basis of a single test, and especially not a single administration of a single test. Standards developed by several professional societies condemn use of a single administration of a single assessment to make any high stakes decision, instead encouraging the use of several sources of evidence in making such decisions. Therefore, provisions should be made for students to take accountability tests more than once if necessary and for local educators to use additional evidence in making promotion decisions.
- Research also confirms what most in the current debate already recognize: if the alternative to social promotion is simple retention, there is a serious risk that retained students will be harmed and only a little evidence that they may be helped. There is some evidence that with extra assistance retained students may do better academically for up to three years than they would have done if promoted. Yet the gains wash out after three years, and even these retained-but-assisted students are more likely to drop out of school than if they had not been retained.
- If policymakers wish to minimize the chance that retained students will be harmed, and maximize the chances that they will be helped, then policy should call for special assistance to continue during and beyond the year in which the student is retained.

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The report on which this digest is based can be found at: http://www.consortium-chicago.org

This Digest was developed by the ERIC Clearinghouse on Urban Education, with funding from the Office of Educational Research and Improvement, U.S. Department of Education, under contract no. ED-99-CO-0035. The opinions in this Digest do not necessarily reflect the position or policies of OERI or the Department of Education.

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